

# CONFERENCE REPORT

Institute for South Asia Studies



## INDIA UNDER MODI

A look back on 2-years of BJP rule  
[southasia.berkeley.edu/india-under-modi](http://southasia.berkeley.edu/india-under-modi)

March 11-12, 2016  
The Faculty Club  
University of California at Berkeley

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to

Ben Fong (MBA Candidate, Haas School of Business)  
Nirvikar Jassal (Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science)  
Yoshika Crider (Ph.D. Candidate in Energy & Resources Group)  
Shikha Bhattacharjee (Ph.D. Candidate in Jurisprudence and Social Policy)  
Gustav Steinhardt (Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology)  
Gowri Vijayakumar (Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology)

for their help in the drafting of this report.

## AGENDA

Friday, March 11

9-9:15 AM

### WELCOME

Lawrence Cohen

9:15 - 10:45 AM

### BUSINESS | INDUSTRY

Panelists: Sridar Iyengar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Venkatesh Shukla

Moderator: S. Shankar Sastry | Rapporteur: Ben Fong

10:45 - 11 AM

Break

11 - 12:30 PM

### EDUCATION

Panelists: Seshadri Chari, Faizan Mustafa, Manisha Priyam

Moderator: Pradeep Chhibber | Rapporteur: Nirvikar Jassal

12:30 - 1:30 PM

Lunch

1:30 - 3:00 PM

### HEALTH | DEVELOPMENT | POVERTY

Panelists: Reetika Khera, Ashok Kotwal, Isha Ray

Moderator: Pranab Bardhan | Rapporteur: Yoshika Crider

3:00 - 3:15 PM

Break

3:15 - 4:45 PM

### LAW | JUSTICE | MINORITY RIGHTS

Panelists: Charu Joseph, Sonia Katyal, Lawrence Liang,

Moderator: Sonia Katyal | Rapporteur: Shikha Bhattacharjee

4:45 - 5:00 PM

Break

5:00 - 6:30 PM

Keynote Address: INDIA'S TRAPPED TRANSITIONS

Speaker: Pratap Bhanu Mehta

Saturday, March 12

9:00 - 10:30 AM

### DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

Panelists: Jennifer Bussell, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Usha Ramanathan, Kanwal Rekhi

Moderator: Lawrence Cohen | Rapporteur: Gustav Steinhardt

10:30 - 10:45 AM

Break

10:45 - 12:15 PM

### MEDIA | CULTURE

Panelists: Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, Siddharth Vardarajan

Moderator: Raka Ray | Rapporteur: Gowri Vijayakumar

12:15 - 2:00 PM

Lunch

## PARTICIPANTS



**Pranab Bardhan**  
Professor of Economics,  
(Emeritus) UC Berkeley



**Jennifer Bussell**  
Asst. Professor, Political Science &  
Public Policy, UC Berkeley)



**Seshadri Chari**  
Convener, Foreign Affairs Cell,  
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)



**Pradeep Chhibber**  
Professor of Political Science  
Director, IIS, UC Berkeley



**Lawrence Cohen**  
Professor, Anthropology, South &  
Southeast Asia, UC Berkeley



**Sridar Iyengar**  
Entrepreneur, Angel  
Investor, Mentor



**Charu Joseph**  
Assistant Professor, Journalism,  
Kamala Nehru College, DU



**Sonia Katyal**  
Professor, Law; Co-Director, Center  
for Law & Technology, UC Berkeley



**Reetika Khera**  
Associate Professor of  
Economics, IIT Delhi



**Ashok Kotwal**  
Professor of Economics,  
University of British Columbia



**Lawrence Liang**  
Lawyer; Co-founder, Alternative  
Law Forum



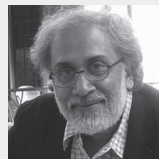
**Pratap Bhanu Mehta**  
President, Center for Policy  
Research, New Delhi



**Faizan Mustafa**  
Vice-Chancellor, NALSAR  
University of Law, Hyderabad



**Manisha Priyam**  
Political Analyst, Researcher, and  
Academic



**Ashish Rajadhyaksha**  
Faculty, Centre for the Study of  
Culture & Society



**Isha Ray**  
Associate Prof., Energy &  
Resources Groups, UC Berkeley



**Raka Ray**  
Professor of Sociology, South and  
Southeast Asia, UC Berkeley



**Kanwal Rekhi**  
Managing Director, Inventus  
Capital Partners



**S. Shankar Sastry**  
Dean, College of Engineering, UC  
Berkeley



**Venkatesh Shukla**  
Chairman, TiE Global & General  
Partner Monta Vista Capital



**Thenmozhi Soundararajan**  
Dalit-American artist



**Paranjay Guha Thakurta**  
Editor, EPW



**Siddharth Vardarajan**  
Founding Editor, The Wire

# INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Cohen

Chair, Institute for South Asia Studies

The Bharatiya Janata (the BJP), or Indian People's Party, on its official English language website brands itself as "the Party with a difference." Taking the party's self-representation seriously we might ask, what is this difference, now, in this moment, and how does it matter. What has it and might it accomplish, and for whom? What is its relation to the six questions this workshop has posed for itself? To debate some of these issues, my colleagues and I at Berkeley have invited to this campus an extraordinary group of scholars and journalists, of senior policy advisors and committed activists, of lawyers and key innovators in tech entrepreneurship and venture capital. Before I briefly address these six questions, let me from the bottom of my heart thank all these participants for journeying across the world or across California, or across north Berkeley, amid busy lives in a time, like most times, marked by a sense of urgency.

Let me thank my colleagues at the Institute for South Asia Studies whose vision has brought us together, principally Professor Pradeep Chhibber and Professor Raka Ray who have given so much of their time, Pradeep while directing the Institute for International Studies which has generously co sponsored this event and Raka while being chair of the sociology department and being on research leave, Dr. Sanchita Saxena the Executive Director of the South Asia Institute, Puneeta Kala our Program Director, Sridevi Prasad the Program Assistant, Mike Ganim our Finance Officer, Jasleen Singh our intern, and Manali Sheth our former program assistant. Let me also thank Professor Pranab Bardhan and Professor Poulomi Saha for critical advice at critical moments, several leading members of The Indus Entrepreneur, or TIE, also for critical advice at critical moments. Let me thank the US Department of Education that continues to designate Berkeley as a National Resource Center for South Asia and enables us to do the work we do. Let me thank the Sarah Kailath Memorial Lectureship, the Indo-American Community Lectureship, the Maharaj Kaul Lectureship, and the Bay Area communities that have sustained these, and all of us.

What are the six areas that we have asked the experts assembled here to consider and with civility, rigor, passion, and evidence to debate?

The first are questions of **POVERTY & HEALTH**, in an urbanizing country marked by shifting dynamics of agrarian, industrial, service, and entrepreneurial labor, caste, and aspiration, and by a disease burden which belies the old concept of an epidemiological transition from developing country infectious disease to developed country chronic disease and rather is marked by dense assemblages of infectious tuberculosis, diarrheal disease, and dengue, chronic heart disease, under-nutrition, mental illness and the immediate and chronic effects of familial communal and structural violence and the crippling *chinta* and tension that mark life on the social margin. India has among the largest fraternities of trained medical expertise on the planet and yet its health care sector has been persistently marked by an abysmal record and by a savage dearth of clinical competency. This is not a BJP issue any more than it is a Congress or regional party or left party issue – the failures in health care policy run deep – but if we are to consider this moment, under

this party, what questions should we be asking? What new programs and policies are being developed and to what effect? What have been the fate of the major anti-poverty initiatives developed under previous Congress and BJP regimes, such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act? What happens to minoritized poverty, and specifically to Dalit aspiration, under the emerging anti-poverty archipelago of multiple *yojanas* targeting rural and urban labor and benefit distributions? What is the broader relation of global, national, and regional political economy across the distinctive conditions of different Indian states, at this emerging moment, and what are the challenges for the BJP under Modi? Narendra Modi was elected with both excitement and some ambivalence toward the Gujarat Model of Development, and over the previous months Berkeley has hosted scholars evaluating that model once the dust of electoral battles between economists has settled, most recently Cristophe Jafrelot. What happens once that model is scaled up to Union government policy?

The second area we will consider focuses on **GOVERNANCE IN A DIGITAL AGE**. The promise and threat of the digital delivery of service has marked a significant if variable transformation in the relation of people to the state, amid realities and imaginaries of corruption and service diversion. Access in a nation of an ever larger number of urban migrants to stable and legitimate identification in the making of claims on the state remains precarious. Audits of state and NGO distributions of what are alternatively termed services, rights, entitlements, and benefits have emerged on the micro level of the so-called social audit and the national level of the biometric archive of the Unique Identification Authority of India and its Aadhaar card. Questions of the monetization of service and the viability of direct benefits transfer loom. If under the previous government digital governance at the massive end of the scale was contested between Nilekani's Aadhaar and Chidambaram's NPR, how has the Modi government's development of Digital India and the so called JAM trinity changed the equation? How might we think about the current efforts to provide Aadhaar with the statutory authority that it has always lacked? Might the experiences of other so called mid level economies in regard to mobile phone mediated Direct Benefit Transfer programs be relevant, or is India a special case?

The third area, and the one that opens this conference, is the question of **INDUSTRY AND TECHNOLOGY** policy. Berkeley is an interesting place to have this conversation as we combine a century of sustained scholarship on India with the past two decades of dialogue with engineering and infotech expertise and venture capital in Silicon Valley, and we have a cutting edge engineering college rethinking how to link technical innovation to anti poverty programs. The election of Narendra Modi was, at least in the many conversations I have had in the Valley, widely heralded as an opening for investment and tech development by NRI entrepreneurs committed to India and to new visions of development, and this was both by those entrepreneurs who had long supported the Hindu nationalism of the BJP and those who were critical of the party's, and particularly Modi's, record in regard to communal violence. If the 1990s and 2000s were decades in which the figure of the Chief Minister and not the Prime Minister was the dominant political locus of charisma—and Modi, Lallu, Jaya, Naidu, Mayawati, and others contended on a national and even global stage as embodying alternative visions of governance—Modi had come to represent not only a hard line Hindutva but an aggressively managed and efficient state order. How has the promise of Modian efficiency and clean government in the further (and debated) liberalization of tech and industrial policy been realized? What is the ongoing relation, since we are in California, between the Valley and the Union Government? If innovation demands a so called creative class, how has the aggressive government attacks in this moment on university faculty and students affected the climate for a culture of innovation and creativity? What has been the effect of the Make in India campaign, and does it matter to these larger questions?

Speaking of the university, the fourth area is that of **EDUCATION**. But it is not just the matter of the university. How have the many schemes for primary and secondary education under both earlier Congress and BJP regimes fared, and what is the current policy climate and current challenges? Is the BJP's focus a communally oriented revisionist secondary school history curriculum or does it look beyond this? If we take quite seriously the RSS claim that the moral fabric of post colonial education must be critically rethought but not necessarily the RSS commitment to what has been termed the ethnic cleansing of history, what would such a conversation look like, and might the BJP and its presumptive difference have an important role to play? If in education, as in health, India does not lack for accomplished high level research expertise, what are the impediments to that research's translation into policy and that policy's translation into institutions? At both the pre college and university levels, how might we understand privatization today, the growth both of high level private research universities and of myriad and far less studied local private colleges? How do we make sense of growing state intervention into faculty governance of curricula and student activism, whether for example the UDA government's varied interventions into Delhi University or the BJP's current actions at JNU and elsewhere? What happens when we shift our gaze away from this small network of elite English medium universities?

Perhaps the question of the university belongs squarely in the fifth area, that of **MEDIA AND CULTURE**. The news media appear more divided than ever before, and does a political sociology that sticks to the tried and true rhetoric of electoral populism help us comprehend media under its massive electronic proliferation and the rise of the internet and social media? We are fond of noting that social media around the world has produced a coarsening of discourse, but how with any precision do we understand the news that greeted me yesterday of a mid level BJP functionary issues what were in effect death threats to Professor Nivedita Menon of JNU on Twitter? In both the US and India, political pundits differentiate cultural from political economic agendas of right leaning parties? Is this a tenable and adequate distinction? What is the ground of culture in this moment of intensified affect and explosions of wounded sentiment?

The final area is perhaps the one that has long been on our minds, given earlier debates when Mr Modi was still Chief Minister, that is of the **WORKING OF LAW** in terms of questions of the rights of the religious minority and at the social margins of class, caste, gender, disability, and sexuality, in the context both of organized violence and of everyday exclusion. How might we understand events, whether Muzaffarnagar or Dadri, and their/its aftermath? How do we think through the campaign against Teesta and other important and controversial activists? What is the space within emergent terrains of morality, variably despotic, to engage questions of law?

But we came to this question of law in a moment marked by the urgency, on all sides, around the figure of sedition. How do we think about dangerous speech? Is the task to enshrine and protect the argumentative Indian? Is a form of rights of so called free speech that the US would claim for itself at stake, and if not what does it mean to imagine a different conversation about the place to entertain ideas that by their power and experimental quality may wound?

What does this mean for our work today? This is a climate of fear for many, whether by design or not? How might we craft our own ethic, over the next two days, of critical engagement?

# PANEL 1: BUSINESS & INDUSTRY

Panelists: Sridar Iyengar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Venkatesh Shukla

Moderator: S. Shankar Sastry | Rapporteur: Ben Fong



S. Shankar Sastry  
Dean, College of Engineering  
UC Berkeley

*Modi campaigned under an economic platform and won by a large margin. Has he delivered on those promises?*



Venkatesh Shukla  
Chairman, TiE Global &  
General Partner Monta Vista Capital

*I have never been more optimistic about India than I am now*



Sridar Iyengar  
Entrepreneur, Angel  
Investor, Mentor

*The people around [Modi] lack the skill or competence to deliver on all the promises that have been made*



Pratap Bhanu Mehta  
President, Center for Policy Research  
New Delhi

*Modi must take political risks in order to achieve substantial economic progress for India*



## SETTING THE STAGE: S. SHANKAR SASTRY

Modi campaigned under an economic platform and won by a large margin. Has he delivered on those promises? We have seen some progress in India in manufacturing, entrepreneurship, and the “Make in India” initiative launched by the Government of India to encourage multi-national and national companies to manufacture these products in India. Has it been enough? What are the engines of growth for India? Moreover, is this focus on growth too simplistic? In particular, the oft-cited technology sector is a winner-take-all industry. What are the implications for inequality from entrepreneurship and business? How can India respond to both the challenges of promoting economic growth as well as the challenges of managing the effects of growth? What does India’s governance look like in a digital age? During Modi’s visit to Silicon Valley, he made a promise of efficiency and liberalization. Given recent attacks at universities, does Indian liberalism have reason to worry? Can Modi scale the Gujarat model? What is the intersection of culture and politics in an India under Modi? What is the status of the rule of law and minorities?

## COMMENTS BY VENKTESH SHUKLA

Shukla opened his comments by asking whether we can compare India to examples in Asia. Asian economies, including Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan saw dramatic economic growth in the late 20th century. When asked why India could not be like the Asian tigers, experts said India is too large and the economies are not comparable. When asked why India could not be like China, experts said that India was not authoritarian enough. These are only excuses. Since independence, India has seen a “self-inflicted economy” due to a “failure of policies.” Regulations were borne out of distrust of business and this distrust of entrepreneurs continues today. Despite GDP growth of 55% from 2005-12, job growth only increased by 3% in the same period.

Modi has made several positive changes in India, including infrastructure, a financial inclusion to require bank accounts for all citizens, and encouraging entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship in particular is necessary to create jobs; roughly 70% of jobs created in India are created by companies less than 5 years old. However, the budding sector lacks local capital and government support. The difficulty has been that investors in India have incentives to invest in the stock market and real estate due to tax reasons. For that reason 90% of investment in India comes from outside. Furthermore, many restrictions on entrepreneurs remain, including 20-page business registration forms and harassment by government officials. However, Modi’s prioritization of entrepreneurship makes many businesspeople confident Modi will deliver.

## COMMENTS BY SRIDAR IYENGAR

As part of his personal research, Iyengar sent a questionnaire to 22 heads of industry in India across various industries to poll them on their optimism of the Modi government. Half of those surveyed believed that Modi’s government had achieved what they expected. Sixteen out of twenty-two did not think Modi would achieve his goals by the end of the first year. The participants rated Modi three out of five as a leader. However, most believed that he had the intent and commitment to go forward. In other words, the consensus was that we have reason to be optimistic, but with doubts. Like Shukla, Iyengar agreed that the startup ecosystem needs capital to succeed. However, more than

capital, he argued it critically needs government help to ensure that results are achieved.

“The messaging is right but the concern is if messaging alone will get us there,” argued Iyengar. Several problems surround the Modi government, the first of which is promising changes that it cannot deliver. Iyengar elaborated, “The people around [Modi] lack the skill or competence to deliver on all the promises that have been made.” More fundamental to this problem is a problem with the structure of the government. There is overcentralization, bad advisors, and a general difficulty attracting talent to work in government. Modi is attempting to run the government like a small company, but this model is not as effective in the national context. Modi has not yet met expectations, but he has the intent and commitment to achieve the necessary reforms.

## COMMENTS BY PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

The Modi regime has overseen incremental change, not transformational change, according to Mehta. However, India needs transformational change to succeed, and Modi must be willing to take political risks to achieve that. The real reasons behind the stagnation of investment has been external factors: 1) effects of global uncertainty; 2) effects of the banking and credit crisis; and 3) rural demand falling.

Modi outlined “Democracy, Demography, and Demand” as necessary drivers of the Indian economy. However, demand has fallen in rural areas and shows no sign it will pick up soon. Rural demand is also critical to the health of the economy. Another unresolved question is: “Will India grow rich before it grows old?” On the other hand, India’s competitiveness has improved by the reform of the power sector and improvements in logistics and infrastructure. Land acquisition remains a problem, but it has become easier than before, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Finally, although large capital receives most of the attention, SMEs are the ones that are making the most impact on the Indian economy. This relates to the issue of the big business lobbies having disproportionate influence in India.

Similar to the difficulties raised by Iyengar in retaining government talent, Mehta stated that the IITs are failing to attract talent because they cannot pay more than government officials receive. Overall, public investment has not increased enough because there has not been a willingness to increase taxes. On health and education, the government has not seen enough progress. These problems require more than the incremental changes pushed by the Modi regime to date. Modi must take political risks in order to achieve substantial economic progress for India.

## OVERALL PANEL SUMMARY

From Modi’s point of view, India is “a car going in the right direction and all that is needed was a new driver and tuning of the engine.” However, the Indian economy needs more than incremental reform. India’s economy requires fundamental and drastic changes in order for it to be able to charge ahead. To do that, Modi must take political risks. So far, Modi’s regime has only implemented incremental change and “has not taken major risks.” Although Modi has not met expectations thus far in his term, there is optimism that he has the right ideas and is on the right track.

One way to reform the “car” of India is to improve the bureaucratic engine of the government. India’s government lacks both the researchers and implementers necessary for economic reforms.

In particular, issues with attracting talent for the bureaucracy is a critical shortcoming. Not only does this problem include government advisors, but it also includes IIT professors and researchers at national labs. Overcentralization is another problem. Furthermore, the tax collection rate in India remains critically low, and this poses additional problems implementing reforms. Modi has the right rhetoric, but lacks either the will or the power to implement his ideas.

India must continue to promote entrepreneurship in India. Entrepreneurship is a critical driver of job creation, with businesses less than five years old creating 70% of jobs in India. Although Modi has signaled his priority for encouraging entrepreneurship, there remains a lack of domestic investment as well as bureaucratic barriers to starting new companies in India. In particular, increasing incentives for capital investment is a critical problem in India. Current tax policy incentivizes Indian investors to invest in the stock market and real estate over entrepreneurs. This has stifled entrepreneurship in India. India must promote small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and new companies that have created the majority of new jobs in India. Although larger companies wield greater influence, addressing SMEs' concerns should be a priority. For example, SMEs must file the same paperwork as required by larger companies, which deters many entrepreneurs from setting up shop. Land acquisition remains an important aspect of entrepreneurship as well, although the panelists disagree as to the extent to which it has improved under Modi.

Although many of Modi's supporters have been disappointed with progress to date, many external factors also have limited the effectiveness of Modi's government. These factors include global uncertainty, the banking and credit crisis, and the decline or rural demand. However, Modi has not made the most of the tools and people at his disposal.

Modi began his term with high expectations from the business community, however many have been disappointed with the results to date. However, Modi's priorities and messages are encouraging and therefore there are reasons to remain optimistic. Modi must move beyond rhetoric and make drastic changes to the "car" of the Indian economy. This could include reforming the bureaucracy, increasing incentives for capital investment and entrepreneurship, and reducing barriers for SMEs. However, these reforms will require political risks, and Modi must be prepared to take them.

## PANEL 2: EDUCATION

Panelists: Seshadri Chari, Faizan Mustafa, Manisha Priyam

Moderator: Pradeep Chhibber | Rapporteur: Nirvikar Jassal



Pradeep Chhibber  
Professor of Political Science  
Director, IIS, UC Berkeley

*Who is regulating primary schools in India? Does the Indian state have the capacity to regulate how teachers are teaching?*



Seshadri Chari  
Convener, Foreign Affairs Cell, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

*The choice of subjects in education in India is quite like the caste system – you can move horizontally but not vertically*



Faizan Mustafa  
Vice-Chancellor, NALSAR  
University of Law, Hyderabad

*There is a “cultural jihad” where rightist fringe groups have received priority in education*



Manisha Priyam  
Political Analyst, Researcher, and  
Academic

*Modi will not be able to create any “world class” institutions but he can at least improve the terrible ones*

## SETTING THE STAGE: PRADEEP CHHIBBER

The challenges facing India's educational system lie in primary and secondary education. Pratham has shown that over the past five years, the number of students at grade five who can read at second grade level has dropped drastically. With primary and secondary education, there is a gradual move away from the government sector to the private. 60 percent of primary school children in Kerala are going to private schools. The question is, who is regulating primary schools? And does the Indian state have the regulatory capacity to regulate how teachers are teaching? Indeed, the privatization model without adequate regulation is a lost cause.

## COMMENTS BY SESHADRI CHARI

Chari highlighted the need to reform the curriculum and infrastructure of educational institutions. He bemoaned the fact that India is still thinking of constructing toilets in schools, which for a country of India's size is shameful. The quality of infrastructure through which we channel education has to improve, especially since girls tend to dropout if there are no toilets. In addition, the educational system, Chari argued, is very rigid. If you are not strong in mathematics for example, then physics/chemistry is automatically ruled out for a student. Because of this, a student is not able to broaden his horizons or experiment with different fields. To be fair to the Modi government, Chari argued that many experiments are being undertaken to address this ineffectual system and that there are a lot of positive intentions behind the recent policy changes.

Chari also discussed the issue of Dinanath Batra, a right-wing fringe author whose works has appeared to be taken seriously by the Modi government. Chari confirmed that Batra is not a part of the committee that restructures education; Batra runs an NGO and his services are made available to the RSS from time to time. The Ministry of Education has not accepted any of Batra's suggestions. However, some of Batra's suggestions have been accepted by an independent organization that runs 120,000 schools, many of which run in Naxal affected areas. Mr. Chari argued that the "saffronization" of India's education system is a myth, and the emphasis on cultivation of moral values in the curriculum is not new, but can be dated back to 1968.

## COMMENTS BY FAIZAN MUSTAFA

Mustafa began his discussion by acknowledging that the Modi government has been at a disadvantage because his actions have been observed with microscopic scrutiny. Mustafa did highlight that there was a reduction in education spending in Modi's first budget. There is some continuation with the previous government in terms of attempting to strip away from the autonomy of higher educational institutions like the IIM's IITs, but the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD) minister, Smriti Irani, has made this worse. In addition, Mustafa argued that the "Choice Based Credit Policy" is a misnomer – it's a choice *imposed* on students. Furthermore, in the Modi government, universities have been told that they cannot sign MOU's with other universities without HRD approval, another indication of the HRD minister overstepping her bounds. There is also a "cultural jihad" where rightist fringe groups have received priority in education. The influence of the RSS cannot be underemphasized, and even Amartya Sen, Mustafa argues, has said that the BJP government is imposing Hindutva ideologies on institutions of higher

learning. While the Congress was also to blame for appointing its supporters in higher educational administration, primarily leftists, they were still scholars of some repute. On the other hand, the BJP's appointments are unpublished rogue elements who are not actual scholars. The main theme of Mustafa's presentation was that India's education system is overregulated and under governed. Finally, he reemphasized the importance of public education and how such institutions reaffirm the idea of democracy.

## COMMENTS BY MANISHA PRIYAM

Priyam began her presentation by highlighting how education, especially higher education, was appropriated by the central government from a state level activity in 1976 (when it was brought into the concurrent list of the Constitution). While the Center is particularly relevant in higher education, it should not be. Priyam was particularly concerned with the Modi government's emphasis on creating "world class" universities. A thriving ecosystem of public universities needs to be created and supported, and not developing a fixation on "world class." At this point of time, she argued, even in two administrations Modi would be unable to create any "world class" institutions but there is still room to improve the terrible universities and make them at least mediocre. The first task is to depoliticize higher education. In many ways, she argued, India's public institution system should learn from the legacy of California's higher education institutions. Priyam also highlighted the gender imbalance in university administration. Despite Kerala ranking high on development and gender indicators, Kerala University has never had a women vice chancellor. This is emblematic of the Center—both under Congress and the BJP—of attempting small order changes instead of large scale ones.

## OVERALL PANEL SUMMARY

All the panelists agreed that education in India has become a business. Chari suggested that the only way to make more money than the education racket these days is to get a loan from a bank and not repay it. Mustafa and Priyam implicitly agreed, but expanded that line of thought by suggesting that public institutions are critical for any democracy and the gradual privatization of education, instead of focusing on adequate funding or on reviving existing public institutions, has contributed to the deterioration of the educational sector in India. One of Chari's points was that the number of students entering the IITs has depreciated by one lakh, and that this is a sign of worry if students are becoming less interested in such fields. The other panelists agreed with Chari's diagnosis of the problem: there is an urgent need to restructure pedagogy and the structure of course selection at the undergraduate level. Chari argued that, "the choice of subjects in education in India is quite like the caste system – you can move horizontally but not vertically."

Mustafa and Priyam did have some notable differences with Chari. They fundamentally disagreed with the idea that education should in anyway instill a "common citizenship" or strengthen "national integration" as Chari argued. Instead, the previous two panelists highlighted how the "saffronization" of India's education system under the Modi government is indeed a cause for concern, as it stifles the ability of students to be non-conformists in their thinking. They suggested that any attempt to teach nationalism in educational institutions is foolish and would no doubt backfire. Priyam suggested that the recent crackdown on JNU students is an example of the states viewing students as political agents, an idea that was supported by the other panelists and the audience.

All three panelists highlighted the need for overall reconstruction of the education system. While Chari suggested that these changes are already in place and need to be given time in order to see the effects of policy changes, Mustafa and Priyam highlighted that many of the proposed changes are a cause for worry. While Priyam and Mustafa did agree that the BJP cannot alone be held responsible for the sad state of India's education system, under this regime there has been an effort to change the content of textbooks, insert incorrect histories/science, and especially punish those who do not agree with the right-of-center politically.

# PANEL 3: HEALTH, DEVELOPMENT & POVERTY

Panelists: Reetika Khera, Ashok Kotwal, Isha Ray

Moderator: Pranab Bardhan | Rapporteur: Yoshika Crider



Pranab Bardhan  
Professor of Economics,  
(Emeritus) UC Berkeley

*Modi is a good spin master, and he constructs catchy acronyms. But we have to look beyond the hype*



Reetika Khera  
Associate Professor of  
Economics, IIT Delhi

*No country can become a superpower without investing seriously in health and education*



Ashok Kotwal  
Professor of Economics,  
University of British Columbia

*The Achilles heel of Indian governance is the flawed grass roots level institutions through which state machinery operates*



Isha Ray  
Associate Prof., Energy &  
Resources Groups, UC Berkeley

*Neglecting to consider the totality of the needs of Swacch Bharat means the program cannot achieve all of its goals*



## SETTING THE STAGE: PRANAB BARDHAN

Bardhan did not make any specific comments in setting the stage for the panel discussion. He opted instead to share his views before opening the Q&A session that took place after three panelists had made their presentations.

## COMMENTS BY REETIKA KHERA

Khera spoke of the neglect of social policy in India. First, she opened with a story about an indecisive thief allowed to choose his own punishment. He chooses then reconsiders, chooses then reconsiders. This indecision, she said, is how social policy seems to be implemented in India. India is a world champion in social “under-spending”. The nation trails behind neighbor Bangladesh in public health indicators such as vaccination rates and child mortality. There are numerous schemes that could be funded, such as maternity entitlements, social security pensions, and integrated child development services. But, when it comes to actually putting money into these programs, hardly any of the Indian states are funding them. Tamil Nadu is a notable exception, named as a model state for social programs.

As chief minister, Modi criticized the National Food Security Act as not doing enough. The following year, some of the components were actually pulled back for political reasons. There is controversy over the inclusion of eggs in the mid-day meal social program. The centralization of mid-day meal kitchens makes it difficult to know where to direct complaints. Khera described Aadhaar, a government biometric identification database program, as one of the scariest parts of the government, prompting serious concerns about civil liberties and right to privacy. There has been improvement in coverage of these schemes, but it is not enough.

Overall, there is hardly anything on social policy in the BJP manifesto. At the state level, there is quite a lot of support for these social programs; they are politically popular with the citizens. However, when there are so many U-turns in official support for various schemes, it is difficult to know what is going on. Importantly, the Indian government must realize that no other country in the world has become a superpower without investing seriously in health and education.

## COMMENTS BY ASHOK KOTWAL

Kotwal began by discussing how growth is a means to poverty reduction, which is ultimately the goal of development. He conceded that two years is too short of a time period to evaluate a new government's performance, but one could look at the rate of progress and the process.

First, the majority of the Indian labor force is in the informal sector, but the fast economic growth is driven by high skill service sectors. The trickle-down effect is relatively small. Poverty reduction would require a few things: increased agricultural productivity, improved human capital through access to quality education and healthcare, and moving labor from low to high productivity activities. Under UPA, a lot of good ideas were put forth, such as Direct Benefit Transfers through Aadhaar and National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. However, implementation was flawed

through leakages and divergence of allocated resources, unspent resources, and lack of coordination. In short, the institutions through which these ideas were being implemented were flawed. The current government is continuing with sensible UPA policies and seems to have the right priorities, but they are also continuing with some bad policies (e.g. distortionary food grain prices), mixing religion with development policy, and interfering in institutes of higher education. Overall, the Achilles heel of Indian governance is the flawed grass roots level institutions through which state machinery operates. The Modi government faces the same obstacles, and Modi's comparative advantage is not in institution building – his record shows no reason to believe that he could turn India around.

Kotwal concluded by noting that UPA lost the last election partly due to a vacuum in leadership and corruption scandals, but also because people's aspirations are rising with growth and those aspirations were not being met. Modi's victory has pushed these aspirations even higher, and given the rate of progress thus far, there will be a lot of people disappointed and disenchanted with what they will get.

## COMMENTS BY ISHA RAY

Ray spoke primarily about health, in particular the Swacch Bharat program, which includes reduction of open defecation through improving the availability and affordability of latrine facilities in rural India. While the funding is not bad, and the Modi government's support of this is admirable, there are barriers to comprehensive and successful implementation.

Only 4-5% of the funding goes to outreach and uptake activities, quite a small amount for a crucial component for success. The limited evidence we have suggests modest program performance; where there is both good investment and data available, we see open defecation going down around 10-15%. However, this program misses the poorest: those who do not have homes that can support a full latrine. There may also be mechanisms incentivizing uptake that are not progressive; for example, the imminent arrival of a young bride may motivate a household to build a latrine. There is no reason for your daughter-in-law to go outside, reinforcing a notion that nobody should see her.

Finally, an essential yet ignored component of the program has been the question of how to take care of waste removal. No one wants to clean their waste; in India this is a job for the Dalit community. Studies have shown that Hindu women would rather close up their latrine and return to open defecation, rather than empty out their own pit latrine.

Thus, in spite of all of the marketing and positive public relations, neglecting to consider the totality of the needs means the program cannot achieve all of its goals.

## OVERALL PANEL SUMMARY

The panel emphasized a distinction between ideas and implementation. The government of India has numerous positive ideas, including free nutrition programs, right to education, cash and food transfers, and disease reduction through improved sanitation. However, these ideas become distorted through flawed institutions or short-sighted planning.

There was strong disagreement about whether or not Aadhaar was a positive or negative program.

On one hand, as Kotwal noted, there are millions of people with no official identity in society. In fact, their biometrics seems to be all they have; the Aadhaar program may serve to better provide them all the benefits of citizenship. On the other hand, noted Khera, there is weak justification for a biometrics database in order to provide benefits transfers. There is hardly any evidence of duplication or leakage in the benefits programs being targeted, and they can be implemented without the use of biometrics verification. This is a toxic part of the program, with dangers for civil liberties and possibilities for broad and intrusive surveillance.

There was overall agreement that some national policies will miss the very poorest in India, instead catching the not-as-poor “low hanging fruit” that leads to fast improvements in overall numbers. For example, Aadhaar requires 2 IDs or references, which poses a barrier for the very poor. In the case of Swacch Bharat, the policies are targeted to those who already have permanent homes in rural areas. This is unlikely to be true of the most poor who lack sanitation facilities. Even for those who receive subsidies and install toilets, this does not affect sanitation access outside of the home, such as in the workplace. Many poor individuals spend the majority of their time in those other settings.

There are also some very negative ideas. Bardhan opened the Q&A by commenting on some of the wrong directions of the Modi government. For example, moving toward privatization of the health system has resulted in private hospitals conducting unwanted procedures, such as hysterectomies on young women, to manipulate the government reimbursement system. The government is also reinterpreting existing environmental regulations to strip away rights, as in the example of canceled land rights for tribal communities to facilitate coal mining operations.

In conclusion, the weaknesses of the social programs in India go beyond any one government administration. However, there have been some worrisome recent developments in healthcare privatization and environmental policy, which deserve attention. To be fair, the Modi government has inherited an imperfect situation, and although there are numerous positive ideas, significant reform of institutions, increased funding, and improved implementation are necessary to realize the full expectations of the Indian public. Modi’s record does not reflect a strength in institution building, so the extraordinarily high expectations of the current government may lead to a disappointed electorate.

# PANEL 4: LAW, JUSTICE, & MINORITY RIGHTS

Panelists: Charu Joseph, Sonia Katyal, Lawrence Liang

Moderator: Sonia Katyal | Rapporteur: Shikha Bhattacharjee



Sonia Katyal  
Professor, Law; Co-Director, Center for  
Law & Technology, UC Berkeley

*Should the law shape the role of political leaders? What is and could its role be in such difficult times?*



Charu Joseph  
Assistant Professor, Journalism,  
Kamala Nehru College, DU

*Media projection of nationalist scripts render non-Hindu subjects invisible, and minoritarian subjects are made visible only as subjects of violent spectacle*



Lawrence Liang  
Lawyer; Co-founder, Alternative Law  
Forum

*We have entered the “era of the smart mobs” where media sovereignty structurally damages constitutionalism and allows vigilante justice to take over*

## SETTING THE STAGE: SONIA KATYAL

Katyal framed the session by invoking the role of media and law in constructing what Benedict Anderson has referred to as “imagined communities.” Central to this inquiry, she begins with a series of questions on the role of the media: How does the media make and unmake a nation or sovereign in an age of instant communication? How does the media make and unmake political leadership and community? How does the media make and unmake trajectories of citizenship through delineation of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion? Engaging the law in this interactive process of imagining communities, Katyal asks: Does law track the will of the sovereign? Should it shape the boundaries of the role of political leaders? What is and could the role of the law be in such difficult times?

## COMMENTS BY CHARU JOSEPH

Joseph is concerned with larger than life narratives and the mobilizing force of technology in strengthening totalitarian sources and discourses. Joseph’s central argument is that first, spectacularization of the Modi figure; and second, media narratives of the present that reproduce political violence in the form of events shrink the space of public debate in contemporary India.

First, Joseph argues that the politicization of Hindu nationalism is a continuum, with media embedded in this cultural system of power. National media reflects the interests of a mobile middle class. Media acts to normalize gender, religion and caste-based structures of power. Within this context, women and Dalits make their way into the media through spectacles of violence. Cultural production of the Hindu epic, coupled with upper caste disdain, is central to the systematic Modi media campaign. Projection of authority through development transfigures Modi from a tainted leader linked to communal violence in Gujarat to a leader of the people who can uniquely realize the aspirations of a consumer public. Within this shifting frame, elaborate stage shows and religious symbolism present themselves as spectacles of Hindu nationalism. Evocation of a new familiarity elides a past and continued presence of violence. The media, in this way, configures Modi as a present and future leader—eliding narratives of past violence.

Second, the invisibility of religious and caste minorities positions the Hindu upper caste subject as ideal citizen. Hindu nationalist fervor taps into this invigoration, requiring articulation of explicit patriotism by the non-Hindu subject. Joseph illustrates this point with two cases. First, the recent Dadri lynching case is an instance of extreme violence based upon allegation that Muslim man consumed beef. Media responses called for proof of patriotism from the Muslim victim. Second, in response to Rohit Vemula’s suicide, media attention invited visibility. Death figured in the media as a spectacle—the only way the contemporary Indian media knows to address caste.

## COMMENTS BY SONIA KATYAL

Katyal addresses the role of the media and legal apparatus in addressing non-normative sexuality in India. She argues that the media has been central in pushing exclusion for sexual minorities. Judicial, legislative and executive branches have a more mixed record that tilts toward the register of disenfranchising.

Evoking John Hart Ely, Katyal argues that the judiciary should stand up for the rights of the minority due to defects in the political system. This proposal centers on the view that the court should devote itself to ensuring majority governance while preserving minority rights. Against this measure, Katyal argues that India is nearly an optimistic picture, citing the overlap of procedural protections and judicial recognition of the public outcry after the 377 decision in 2013. Recounting the lead up to this contemporary moment, Katyal reviews the July 2009 decriminalization of sodomy read down by the Delhi High Court. This victory, however, was followed by the Supreme Court decision to uphold 377 in 2013. While the Delhi Court opinion marked a rare opportunity for activists to shape gay rights, the Supreme Court held that 377 could be upheld and called on Parliament to change the law. In this move, the Indian Supreme Court abandoned responsibility for upholding minority rights, punting to the Parliament. The bill to decriminalize sodomy, however, failed in the legislature. In another line of this narrative on the rights of sexual minorities, less than two years later, the Supreme Court declares trans people as a third gender, calls for recognition of a third gender on official documents and recommends that schemes should be extended to trans people. Despite these advances however, violence against trans people continues. This fluidity of opinions on 377, Katyal argues, demonstrates the potential role of the state in establishing different ways to approach constitutional protections for sexual and gender minorities. It also highlights a diaspora of legal principles and a trend toward constitutional borrowing across jurisdictions.

## COMMENTS BY LAWRENCE LIANG

Liang describes a convergence of forces where the metalaw of media is coming into play, systematically undermining of ideas of constitutionalism and the rule of law. India has a rich history of high threshold for when a speech act amounts to sedition. Incitement in the media, however, has forced us to push forward the relationship between law, metalaw and media. Liang marks this phenomenon as eight years of rule under Arnab Goswami—the emergence of a certain kind of sovereignty that emerges via television and reconfigures the relationship between law, sovereignty and populism. The following examples illustrate: the Prime Minister urges citizens to take a selfie after casting a vote. #selfiewithmodi is displayed as a Modi mosaic that bears a striking resemblance to the Hobbesian image of Bose—literally constituted by the blending of citizen bodies. While the Modi hologram has been distinguished as his most striking media innovation, Liang argues that the real media innovation is not hologram, but the micro image. The viral affective charge of rapidly circulating micro images is integral to constructing the public imaginary around Modi. In this reconfiguration, the Prime Minister emerges as a brand that must be protected at all costs. Brand protection is forged not through trademark, anti-dilution and defamation but through a newly favored mode: hate speech laws. Arrests in Bangalore and Kerala target students under Section 66A for tarnishing political brands in social media. In this way, the Modi campaign threatens to silence any critique or dissent.

Violent vigilantes find cover beneath the image of the ultimate sovereign, licensing acts of violence with impunity. The beatings of Kanhaiya Kumar, a call for his tongue are authorized by impunity guaranteed by implied license sustained through silence by the sovereign. Young Shiv Sena activists cite *powertoni*—power of attorney—as an evocation of vicarious sovereignty that denotes immunity. We have entered the “era of the smart mobs” where *powertoni* + media sovereignty structurally damages constitutionalism and allows vigilante justice to take over.

## OVERALL PANEL SUMMARY

Each of the three panelists speaking on law, justice and minority rights—including, we should note, two lawyers—positioned media as central to the mediation of law, justice and minority rights in contemporary India. Returning to the opening frame delineated by Katyal, each of these speakers engages in understanding the role of media and the law in constructing an imagined national community.

How does the media make and unmake a nation or sovereign in an age of instant communication? Joseph highlights the media projection of nationalist scripts that render non-Hindu subjects invisible. Minoritarian subjects, in this account, are made visible only as subjects of violent spectacle. Their position as victims of violence, however, is configured in relationship to their deviation from the ideal subject. Joseph suggests that it is the victim rather than the individual or structural perpetrator of violence that must seek redemption by declaring nationalist allegiance.

Liang further operationalizes this paradigm. Where Joseph cites media projection of national scripts through circulation of Hindu epics, Liang points to viral circulation of micro images of the national sovereign. Together, they point to the role of both the viral epic and viral micro-image in consolidating a Hindu nationalist discourse.

Returning to Katyal's line of questioning, she asks: How does the media make and unmake political leadership and community? How does the media make and unmake trajectories of citizenship through delineation of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion? In the account forwarded by Joseph and Liang, the media making of political leadership corresponds with delineating the boundaries of the national community—boundaries predicated on exclusion of minority communities.

For both Joseph and Liang, colonization of the media by spectacular and minute circulation of a nationalist discourse is dangerous because it authorizes violence. Within this discursive structure, impunity among vigilante perpetrators against minority individuals and communities is further sanctioned by lack of public condemnation that functions as tacit approval. How does the law track the will of the sovereign? Legal discourse comes to be colonized by the media, displacing the authority of the legal apparatus with the verdict of the media.

Addressing a linked but slightly different question, Katyal provides a vision of what the role of law can be in such difficult times. Katyal evokes an image of the judiciary as grappling with key issues of protecting the rights of minority subjects. While the complex and even contradictory posture of the courts in the 377 and Nas decisions reveals a grappling negotiation of constitutional protections and customary norms on permissible sexuality, in Katyal's hopeful account, this grappling is centered as a site of critical engagement. Katyal's account also captures the authoritative position of the media, but this time leveraged by a discursive script quite distinct from the nationalist rhetoric evoked by Joseph and Liang. Katyal links the Supreme Court decision to revisit re-criminalization of sodomy under 377 to national and international public and media-projected uproar over the Supreme Court refusal to strike down 377 and uphold minority rights.

# PANEL 5: DIGITAL GOVERNANCE

Panelists: Jennifer Bussell, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Kanwal Rekhi

Moderator: Lawrence Cohen | Rapporteur: Gustav Steinhardt



Lawrence Cohen  
Professor, Anthropology, South &  
Southeast Asia, UC Berkeley

*The promise and threat of the digital delivery of service has marked a significant if variable transformation in the relation of people to the state*



Jennifer Bussell  
Asst. Professor, Political Science &  
Public Policy, UC Berkeley

*Digital tools, while they have great potential to improve the quality of governance in India, by themselves will not fundamentally transform the Indian state*



Ashish Rajadhyaksha  
Faculty, Centre for the Study of  
Culture & Society

*Digital governance and pre-digital governance have more in common than either dystopians or utopians might expect*



Kanwal Rekhi  
Managing Director  
Inventus Capital Partners

*Present-day India has an enviable tech infrastructure and a BJP government that embraces privatization and avoids corruption*



## SETTING THE STAGE: LAWRENCE COHEN

In introducing the panelists and their topic, Cohen opens with a short anecdote that illustrates the dimensions of the debate over digital governance in India. He describes being approached by an engineer involved in developing India's digital governance regime and asked, "Why do you hate us so? We are trying to create solutions to poverty and corruption where you have failed." On Cohen's interpretation, the "you" here refers to the critics of digital governance within the social science and development establishments; the "us" refers to the engineers and technocrats whose hopes for India hang largely on the success of technological reforms and the expansion of a national information infrastructure.

Cohen points to Akhil Gupta's discussion, in *Red Tape*, of the ways in which bureaucratic inefficiency and rent-seeking behaviors create problems not only for the investing classes (who have the resources to be vocal about the problems they encounter), but all the more so for those on the margin. Two interpretations, Cohen argues, are possible at this point: on the one hand, the problems of corruption and inefficiency may demonstrate the need for a digital governance structure that would bypass local distribution points and (potentially corrupt) petty bureaucrats; on the other hand, as Matthew Hull's *Government of Paper* suggests, physical files can be manipulated so as to resist state power, and there is cause to worry that increased digital governance will, in effect, obstruct these possibilities for resistance.

## COMMENTS BY JENNIFER BUSSELL

Bussell opens her talk with an image of a bureaucrat in rural Bihar — a bespectacled man at a small desk, dwarfed by the towers of paper behind him. The man has a small calculator, but no other digital technology is visible. Bussell points out that this image was taken in 2003, after digital governance had already begun to establish itself in India, though clearly without significant effect in this particular office. The piles of paper indicate the power of the bureaucrat: their sheer size can be used as an excuse for delay or confusion, which creates the possibility for various forms of petty corruption.

Thus the impetus for digital reform is clear. But Bussell cautions against an overeager embrace of such reforms, pointing out that they create their own opportunities and incentives for corruption. In particular, digital reforms depend on a series of public-private partnerships, which can be opportunities for grand corruption; meanwhile, petty corruption can affect the flow of actual services even within the digital governance structure, leading for example to large numbers of centers being opened at which few actual services are provided.

Bussell concludes that digital tools, while they have great potential to improve the quality of governance in India, by themselves will not fundamentally transform the operating principles of the Indian state (either for good or ill). Like all tools, she says, these systems cannot produce outcomes independently of the hands that wield them, and quality of governance will ultimately be determined primarily by the details of implementation.

## COMMENTS BY KANWAL REKHI

Rekhi opens by describing the rampant corruption he experienced as a youth in India during the first two decades of independence. In order to get anything from the state, he says, “you had to know someone.” He came to the United States in 1967 and stayed for over 30 years before returning in 1998, the first year of the second Vajpayee administration. At the time, Vajpayee was saying that “IT is India’s tomorrow” and that the nation could prosper by exporting IT services. Rekhi response was that India lacked the infrastructure to make such a strategy viable, and assembled a team at Stanford to develop solutions to the problem of infrastructure. Their advice, accepted by Vajpayee, was to privatize telecommunications networks but not to sell frequency allocation licenses since this capital could be more productively invested in private markets. Rekhi argues that this approach succeeded in bringing a dynamic IT and telecom infrastructure to India, and that corruption was minimized since no licences were being sold. In 2004, Congress returned to power and reversed the policy against selling licenses — a decision intended to increase public revenue, but which resulted in the widely-reported 2G and 3G scams.

Present-day India, Rekhi says, has an enviable tech infrastructure and a BJP government that embraces privatization and avoids corruption. As an example, he points out that Aadhaar was nominally embraced by Congress but could not be implemented due to infighting and corruption; under the BJP, the program is finally getting underway.

## COMMENTS BY ASHISH RAJADHYAKSHA

Rajadhyaksha returns to Cohen’s anecdote and the separation of social scientists/activists and technocrats/engineers into opposing camps. He describes his experience, in 2009, of working with the Center for the Study of Society and Culture, Bangalore to understand “the social environment of digital governance,” a project that sought to position itself between (or beyond) the two camps. Rajadhyaksha and his colleagues were in conversation, he says, with both “digital utopians,” who saw digital technology as a universal remedy for the ills of India’s public sector, and with “digital dystopians,” who saw it as an existential threat to democracy in India. Rather than subscribe to either of these views, Rajadhyaksha’s project aims to define what he calls “digital realism,” a concrete sense of what everyday life would actually be like under a regime of digital governance, but a view that is not committed to any strong evaluation of such a regime in the abstract.

Rajadhyaksha presented video clips which documented the ground-level experience of enrolling in Aadhaar, and pointed out that, in contrast to the expectation that the national system will circumvent geography, such systems are in fact “profoundly local.” By focusing on a particular enrollment office and the experience of those who appear there for service, Rajadhyaksha looks past aggregate figures and seeks to capture the realities of being governed digitally. Far from bypassing the local distribution center, he says, the digital regime depends on such centers and is exposed to all the risks that this dependence entails.

## OVERALL PANEL SUMMARY

Broadly, the panel largely supports and illustrates Bussell’s prediction that digital tools will not, by themselves, fundamentally transform the basic structure of Indian governance, but that instead they will amplify or modulate existing tendencies: they will eliminate some opportunities for corruption while opening others, and make some policies more efficient while creating inefficiencies of their

own. The similarities between pre-digital and digital governance are made visible in the practices of Aadhaar enrollment as illustrated by Rajadhyaksha's documentary.

Rajadhyaksha's video, for example, demonstrates that one still "has to know someone," just as Rekhi and his family did over a half-century ago. In order to enroll in Aadhaar, citizens must appear in person and present letters from "introducers." This system was initially intended to accommodate Indian citizens who could produce no other proof of identity or residence. In practice, however, the category of the introducer opens up new spaces for corruption, exclusion, and inequality in the gaps between digital system and material implementation. Those who cannot secure (or perhaps purchase?) the endorsement of a suitable introducer will not necessarily fare any better under Aadhaar than under prior administrative systems — at any rate, the sheer digital nature of Aadhaar does not by itself eliminate such problems.

Similarly, Rajadhyaksha's video shows that the "size of the pile" still creates opportunities for exclusion, corruption, and inefficiency, as was the case for Bussell's Bihari bureaucrat. Although the Aadhaar enrollment centers are, in theory, open to all Indians, actual access to them is restricted, and there are clear exclusions relating to place of residence and (less explicitly) to caste. Workers at the enrollment center justify these exclusions by pointing out that they are necessary in order to prevent chaotic and unmanageable queuing at the small, understaffed office. Here again is evidence for the "profoundly local" character of digital governance in India, and of the broader sense that digital governance and pre-digital governance have more in common than either dystopians or utopians might expect.

Rajadhyaksha aptly summarizes this conclusion in describing his documentary: when we examine the expansion of digital governance, he says, what we see is India "translating its entire democratic structure in its fullest sense — warts and all — into the digital domain." To call this process a translation is to say that the digital governance regime is still recognizable as a product of the same underlying tendencies that produced earlier systems of government; but it is also to say that the results cannot be definitely predicted merely on the basis of those persistent tendencies. Rather than pinning the full weight of either hope or fear on the coming of the digital regime, this panel suggests that digital governance will bring with it a familiar set of problems, albeit contoured by a new set of idioms, technologies, and institutional arrangements.

# PANEL 6: MEDIA & CULTURE

Panelists: Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Paranjay Guha Thakurta, Siddharth Vardarajan

Moderator: Raka Ray | Rapporteur: Gowri Vijayakumar



Raka Ray  
Professor of Sociology, South and  
Southeast Asia, UC Berkeley

*What is being denied, and what enabled by the media and what “chilling effect” on meaningful debate is being enacted by media spectacles*



Thenmozhi Soundararajan  
Dalit-American artist

*Those critical of the Modi government have received criticism that sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly takes on tones of sexual violence*



Paranjay Guha Thakurta  
Editor, EPW

*The corporatization of media had led to a presidential-style election and the polarization of debate*



Siddharth Vardarajan  
Founding Editor, The Wire

*The Modi government is highly sensitive to negative coverage and actively suppresses it resulting in an increase in censorship*

## SETTING THE STAGE: RAKA RAY

Ray introduced the last panel as a fitting conclusion to the two days of discussions about politics and public culture under Modi. Threaded through many speakers' presentations at the conference was the question of media—both of the role of mainstream media in narrowing the scope of public critique, and of changes in the structure of media that might reconfigure the relationship between media and society. Frequent mentions of Arnab Goswami, Ray pointed out, were attacks at low-hanging fruit: Goswami is only one example of media that replaces the court of law, tries and convicts people in public, and shrinks spaces for debate. Ray asked what was being denied, and what enabled by the media—and what “chilling effect” on meaningful debate was being enacted by media spectacles. Ray concluded by invoking Gramsci's idea of the “war of the position” to analyze public culture in the age of Modi. For Gramsci, the war of position is a slow process by which a new common sense comes to prevail. At the moment, Ray said, the war of position had been won by the right. At stake in this war of position are the question of national pride as well as new sites of national anxiety (including new particular forms of caste masculinity). As in Gramsci's war of position, no victory is absolute. Ray asked the panelists and audience to reflect on emergent sites of renewal and rethinking, and new subjectivities that might exceed the current conjuncture.

## COMMENTS BY PARANJOY GUHA THAKURTA

Thakurta began by outlining structural trends in mass media in India. He noted that the huge number of radio, television and newspaper sources obscures the fact that a few companies control the majority of media circulation. For example, Delhi has sixteen daily English newspapers, but the top two, the Times of India and the Hindustan Times, account for three quarters of all English newspaper circulation (and two Hindi newspapers are circulated even more widely than the Times of India). The corporatization of media extends to the rise of “paid news” and the increasing breakdown of the divide between reporting, advertising, and entertainment. Thakurta then discussed media in the age of Modi. In the 2014 election, the corporate sector and the media openly supported one candidate, Modi, framing the election as an American-style, two-candidate presidential contest rather than that of a multi-party democracy in which half of voters do not vote for the two major parties. Second, the media constructed Modi as a larger-than-life figure, a macho prime minister with a 56-inch chest. Notably, the BJP spent 60% of its election expenditure on media—thus the media loved Modi, and Modi loved the media. This relationship reinforced the polarization of the polity. Nevertheless, Thakurta suggested that these developments might cut both ways: the Delhi election also became a two-party contest in which the Aam Aadmi Party won out over the BJP's Kiran Bedi. Further, the short attention span of media could heighten tendencies toward anti-incumbency that might eventually wear down the phenomenon of virtual Modi.

## COMMENTS BY SIDDHARTH VARDARAJAN

Vardarajan positioned Modi's rise at the intersection of four trends in media production and consumption. First, an emerging crisis in the business model for media production means media outlets are sustained through cross-subsidization by entertainment or ancillary industries, and the reader contributes only 5-10% of revenue. In short, Vardarajan argued, the Hindustan Times is an investment firm that owns a newspaper. This crisis renders the owners of media houses risk averse,

vulnerable to bias, and eager to attract ratings in any way possible. Second, Vardarajan pointed to a growing tendency to editorialize news. TV channels are increasingly dispensing with expensive and time-consuming data gathering on the ground, and instead focus on more economical and entertaining gladiatorial contests between guests, many of whom do not even get paid. For example, few reporters covered the death of 30 women from a botched sterilization in Chattisgarh, but news channels all covered the Madison Square Garden appearance of Modi. Third, Vardarajan argued that public discourse has become increasingly brittle, with widespread finger-pointing and fear of reaction. Finally, the government is highly sensitive to negative coverage and actively suppresses it: prominent news organizations have retracted stories critical of the administration, and many such stories never make it to print. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Sangh Parivar and the mass media is not completely linear—Vardarajan pointed to the ways in which the hysterics of the mass media can actually force the government into politically untenable positions, or circulate stories like that of the JNU protests.

## COMMENTS BY THENMOZHI SOUNDARARAJAN

Soundararajan discussed what she called the crisis of Dalit journalism in the era of Modi. She began by discussing caste hierarchies within media production: citing a 2006 CSDS survey, she noted that 90% of decision-makers in print media and 79% in television are upper-caste. Caste oppression within media reinforces the suppression of Dalit critique outside media. For example, Soundararajan quoted an intelligence report that argues that NGOs that publicize human rights violations “keep India in a state of underdevelopment,” and pointed to the increasing suppression and loss of funding of such NGOs. Soundararajan advocated shifting the focus from individual cases of violence against Dalits to networks of impunity and caste privilege that extend through and beyond media production: these are systemic problems that ultimately represent the failure of the state to implement the rule of law. These networks of privilege also persist within social media. Soundararajan cited violent, sexist, and casteist abuse on social media—low quality of debate, she said, that reflected the low quality of the administration. Soundararajan positioned the painting of caste activists like Rohith Vemula as anti-national within a long history of branding Dalit liberation efforts as a threat to national cohesion. Casteism pervades the BJP—Soundararajan showed a collection of casteist remarks from members of the BJP—as well as the media, and Soundararajan argued that the dismantling of caste apartheid must occur on all fronts. Soundararajan also discussed ways to subvert savarna domination in media: Dalit Bahujan citizen reporting and the #JusticeforRohith hashtag, for example.

## OVERALL PANEL SUMMARY

All three of the panelists turned their lenses on the structures of media and cultural production that predated Modi’s election. Thakurta focused on the corporatization of media; Vardarajan talked about the crisis of the media sector’s business model. Soundararajan focused on the social composition of media producers, and caste exclusion within media institutions. These dynamics within media production create the conditions for polarized and superficial public debate. In the discussion, Anasuya Sengupta, a member of the audience, pushed Vardarajan and Thakurta to, as Soundararajan had suggested, embrace their own discomfort, and reflect on caste relations within their own media institutions. They agreed that underrepresentation in media is an urgent problem—Dalits as well as Muslims and women in general are drastically underrepresented in media companies, especially at the top levels.

All three panelists then showed how the Modi moment crystallized these trends in media. Thakurta argued that corporatization had led to a presidential-style election and the polarization of debate. Vardarajan, echoing Thakurta's critique, also pointed to an increase in censorship. Notably, all three panelists emphasized how, rather than necessarily serving as a space for dialogue, social media can intensify trends in TV and print media, reinforcing its tendency to polarize and narrow the scope of conversation. Soundararajan cited several examples of the extent of social media harassment those critical of the Modi government have received, criticism that sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly takes on tones of sexual violence.

Despite somewhat bleak assessments, all three panelists spoke of ways to, as Ray put it, wage a war of position within media. Thakurta was optimistic that the plurality of public debate would eventually be reflected in media, and cited sections of media that continue to be "more activist than ever before." This is, he argued, the "dark before the dawn." Vardarajan spoke of spaces for independent analysis within the media establishment—his own publication, the Wire, has pursued a nonprofit model in order to counter dominant trends in media production. Soundararajan cited several examples of successful critical social media campaigns, such as #Modifail and Make Hate in India. Such social media efforts pushed commentator Rupa Subramanya to apologize for comments about Soni Sori's acid attack. Soundararajan pointed out that social media could have a particular role to play in expanding the conversation about single events into structural analyses: for example, Dalit Twitter and #JusticeforRohith played helped identify the systemic conditions of Rohith Vemula's suicide. She argued that a similar, more intersectional analysis of the Nirbhaya gang rape, that discussed the rapes of Dalit women all over India, was missing in the mainstream media.

The panel converged on the idea that media could serve both to dampen debate and to expand it. Thakurta said the challenge was not to make the media unbiased, an impossible task, but instead to bias the media correctly. These efforts, for Liang, raised the question of what counter-strategies might exist outside the existing conditions in which debate takes place. Is this, he asked a war of position in which critics can only react within the given parameters, or is there space to counter and reconfigure the very terrain of media production?

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS:

# INDIA'S TRAPPED TRANSITIONS

Pratap Bhanu Mehta



Mehta addresses three central themes in his keynote address: first, how do we characterize this political moment in India; second, what are some of the trapped transitions that characterize contemporary India; and third, what is the political response to these transitions?

Mehta characterizes this historical period as a moment of two foundational crises in Indian democracy. First, India faces a familiar crisis of representation in which democracy is not just public opinion while public opinion lies at the foundation of legitimacy. Second, in the fraught relationship between public opinion and truth, India is at a juncture where we must question whether a democratic conversation is even possible.

Addressing the first point, Mehta reflects that today everyone—from national television anchors to a wide range of politicians and political actors—claim to be the embodiment of public opinion. While political actors declare an unmediated singularity to their claim to public legitimacy, this posture belies an anxiety about public opinion. We are left with a trajectory of public discourse that is an odd combination of bluster and fragility. Socially embedded, social coalition and electoral identity based claims to authority stake a claim to public opinion. However, it is only after policies are promulgated that we truly know what public opinion is. Within this space of tenuous fragility, Mehta argues that there is a space and hope for the opening of a democratic space.

Addressing the second foundational crisis, Mehta questions whether a democratic conversation is in fact possible. Between democratic argument and technocratic, policy-oriented argument, Mehta argues that we must come to some agreed upon protocols by which we can articulate and settle political differences. Evidence based policy making has emerged as a mantra but at the same time, background structures, institutions and protocols have eroded. This second crisis of collapsing spaces for democratic engagement has proceeded to the extent that truth is an expression of the will to power.

Addressing the political response to these foundational crises, Mehta articulates the need for three transitions.

First, a transition from crony capitalism to well regulated capitalism—a transition that he defines as one from unrestrained arbitrariness to a degree of transparency and regulation. This process remains incomplete for two contradictory reasons. First, fear of political scandal makes it difficult for government to renegotiate stranded assets and bad bank debts. The degree of bad debts and stranded assets is so widespread that Mehta projects it will take three years to sort out. While



the Indian state may take halting steps toward reforming state-capital relations, Mehta expresses concern for whether capital is ready for the transition.

Second, Mehta argues that 1991 liberalization was intended to settle allocation between public and private responsibility. Instead, states operate through democratic coercion. The operating principle of civil society is voluntary persuasion. Mehta calls for a shift in which profit no longer contaminates politics, in which free exchange no longer determines state action. These principles dictate erection of an institutional architecture of accountability for civil society and capital. At the moment, these institutional architectures are so mixed up that they are mutually distorting. Mehta provides two illustrative examples. First, if 50-60% of budget funding is channeled through private-public partnerships, don't we require different accountability standards? In our current situation, private entities are not audited since they do not receive public funds. Second, private schools are tasked with taking 25% of students from economically marginalized sections. However, with private schools embedded in discharging state responsibilities for desegregation, accountability is distorted.

Third, we must address our sites of social failure. State failure and market failure have cornered debates. We need to direct attention to the different sites at which our political subjectivities and identities are being produced. In particular, Mehta directs attention to restrictions on freedom of speech, sanitation and gender based violence. These transitions are embedded in transitions from the welfare state to the participatory radical state; between a communal and secular-plural India; from a hierarchical order to a representative model of distributing power.

These transitions require us to address features of populism that are features of the Modi government as well as others. These include sociological simplification that constructs a homogenous virtuous people against a new corrupt elite, including NGOs and academics; procedural simplification; and techno-managerial discourses of smart innovation.

These challenges raise global questions about the organizational forms capable of mediating between states and civil societies and raises significant questions about the competency of the political party as the mediating form.

## CONFERENCE ORGANIZER

# INSTITUTE FOR SOUTH ASIA STUDIES

at the University of California, Berkeley

One of the world's leading institutes for research and programs on South Asia, the Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS) at the University of California, Berkeley works with faculty members, graduate students, community members, private institutions, and non-profit organizations to deepen understanding of the region and to create new generations of scholars of South Asia.



ISAS actively:

- Supports teaching and research activities of South Asia-related faculty and their students
- Initiates and administers research projects
- Organizes and hosts lectures, colloquia, seminars, and research conferences
- Develops financial resources for the enhancement of South Asia studies
- Encourages interdisciplinary, regional, and comparative studies of South Asia
- Creates outreach programs in coordination with other institutions of primary, secondary, and post-secondary education
- Administers fellowships and grants for the study of South Asia
- Publishes language textbooks, research notes, and conference reports and an annual newsletter
- Supports cultural and community activities relating to South Asia and South Asians

The Institute is one of the many Organized Research Units on the UC Berkeley campus that are part of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (VCRO) which seeks to maintain a research environment that fosters creativity, collaboration and community on campus.

10 Stephens Hall, UC Berkeley  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2310

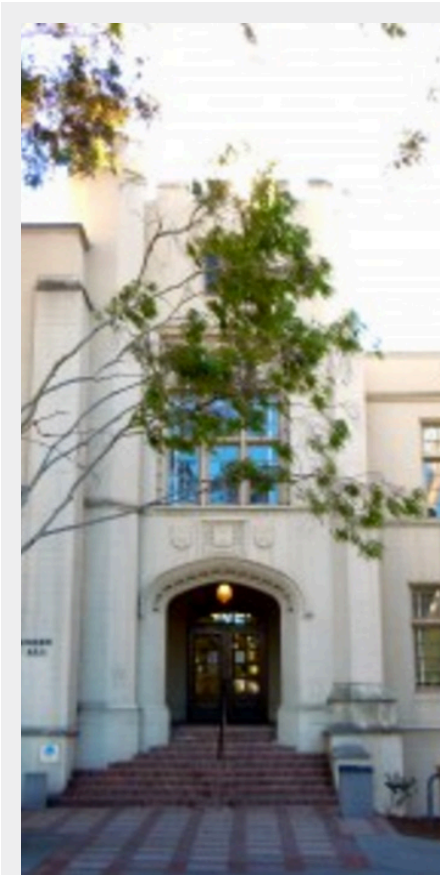
[southasia.berkeley.edu](http://southasia.berkeley.edu)

CONFERENCE ORGANIZER

# INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

at the University of California, Berkeley

The Institute of International Studies (IIS) at the University of California, Berkeley is a multidisciplinary organized research unit (ORU). The Institute's mission is to support research



among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates that engages issues of global concern. The Institute conceives of its multidisciplinary and international mission across three general activities: supporting research; facilitating dialogue; and coordinating lectures.

**RESEARCH:** The Institute awards seed funds for interdisciplinary faculty research and provides assistance to individual faculty through an active book manuscript grant program. IIS fellowships are a vital campus-based source of funding for graduate student research, while the Undergraduate Merit Scholarship offers the only campus-wide merit scholarship for undergraduate research. IIS also provides support for undergraduate travel to international conferences.

**DIALOGUE:** The Institute facilitates dialogue by sponsoring ongoing monthly or weekly seminars and workshops. Currently, these seminars and workshops include: Political Economy, International Relations, Comparative Politics, and Religion and Public Affairs.

**LECTURES:** The Institute addresses its public mission by coordinating free and public lectures, including the Endowed

Elberg Series, the US Foreign Policy Series, and the Asian Security Challenges Series.

215 Moses Hall, UC Berkeley  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2308

[iis.berkeley.edu](http://iis.berkeley.edu)

# ISAS

---

**Institute for South Asia Studies**

University of California at Berkeley

10 Stephens Hall  
Berkeley, CA 94270  
[southasia.berkeley.edu](http://southasia.berkeley.edu)  
510 642 3608